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## Social inclusion in the context of informational society

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### Abstract

In the contemporary society, which wants to be an "informational society", the access to information and communications technologies is increasingly important and offers many advantages to users. There is a special category of users, the persons with disabilities or impairments, who can't fully benefit from these technologies. European policies and legislation have recognized the crucial importance of occupation and employment to ensure equal opportunities for all, to contribute to the full participation of citizens in economic, social and cultural life and enable them to materialize their potential. According to strategy "A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe" adopted by European Commission in November 2010, a strategy for people with disabilities, is taken into account elimination of obstacles that make everyday activities of people with disabilities to be inaccessible. The paper aims to present the role of education and information and communications technologies in achieving social inclusion, the one of the main objectives of European policies.

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### 1. Introduction

According to the first World Report on Disability (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011) from the World Health Organization, in collaboration with the World Bank, launched in June 2011, revealed that 1 billion people worldwide are facing a form of disability.

At European level, one in six people have some form of disability, out of these 40% are persons with reduced mobility, and as the EU population ages there is an increase in the percentage of people with disabilities.

In Romania, according to data processed on 30 March 2011 (National Authority for people with disabilities, 2011), the total number of disabled persons was 691482 people of which 61994 children, increasing from previous statistics. At these problems, related to increasing the number of people with disabilities, are added the global economic crisis and the massive layoffs which lead to increasing the poverty especially among those people.

In this sense, are taken into account a number of principal actions relating to all products and services accessible for people with disabilities, funding for their programs, public awareness raising concerning disability and the accessibilizing and strengthen cooperation between member states.

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## 2. Social inclusion, objective of European policies

Social inclusion refers to the set of measures and actions applicable in various fields such as education, health, social protection, employment, information and communication, security, intended for combating social exclusion. In this respect, several strategies for people with disabilities were adopted at EU, among which are current:

- European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: "A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe" (European Commission, 2010), which presents the specific measures (a ten-year period) by which the national governments and EU can provide people with disabilities the means to enjoy by their rights on equal terms with other people. EU Disability Strategy (European Commission, 2010), focuses on the need to provide equal opportunities to quality education and lifelong learning. The aim is thus active participation in society and the improving quality life of people with disabilities.
- Europe 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010), launched in March 2010, which focuses on common European efforts to provide jobs and reduce unemployment.
- Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2010) is one of the seven flagship initiatives of Europe 2020 and aims to define the role that information and communication technology must play for achieving the objectives of Europe for 2020.

The actions taken by the European Commission through strategies aimed at addressing the problems faced by people with disabilities, are focused on the following main elements:

- Accessibility assistive products and services by adopting measures to improve the functioning market of assistive technology products, which must be "designed for all";
- Promoting equal opportunities for persons with disabilities regarding their participation in all aspects of social and economic life;
- Equal treatment of persons with disabilities, in terms of legislation and anti-discrimination strategies;
- Improve the employment situation of persons with disabilities;
- Equal access to quality education and lifelong learning;
- Social protection and inclusion persons with disabilities in the community.

The importance of availability and accessibility ICT (Information and Communication Technology) products and services on employment of persons with disabilities is undeniable, providing better social inclusion and enabling them to live longer independently (Smeureanu & Isăilă, 2011).

## 3. The role of information and communication technologies in achieving social inclusion

In European legislation it wants an "information society for all" by promoting an inclusive digital society that provides opportunities for all and which to minimize the risk of exclusion.

Regarding the importance of ICT products and services, a first impulse, systematically and important for awareness and European action to the Information Society is the document entitled "Europe and Global Information Society" (Colesca, 2003), launched in 1994 and adopted to the summit of Corfu.

Since then the things have evolved and in 2002 another important moment was the adoption of Action Plan "eEurope 2005 - An Information Society for All" (Colesca, 2005) by the European Council at Seville (June 2002). The deadline to achieve the eEurope 2005 Action Plan coincides with the time for revision of the Lisbon Strategy, which aimed that Europe to reach in 2010 the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy. Renewed strategy focuses on growth and employment.

Based on this strategy and the conclusion that, in Europe, information society has gone from "pilot phase" to the "range expansion" (due to technological progress), Council of Europe launched "i2010 - European Information Society 2010" (Filip, 2005), a five-year strategy aimed at developing the digital economy. It promotes an open and competitive digital economy, focusing on Information and Communications Technology as a driver of inclusion and quality of life.

Removing barriers and technical difficulties faced by disabled people when trying to participate equally in the Information Society is known as "eAccessibility". This is part of the wider eInclusion concept, which refers to other types of barriers, such as the financial, geographical or educational.

The new technologies already provide support for people with disabilities, allowing them to independently perform activities that they could not achieve in the past without the assistance of another person (Isăilă & Smeureanu, 2010).

Despite industry efforts, disabled people still face a number of problems when trying to use ICT products and services primarily due to:

- lack of interoperable solutions for accessible ICT;
- software products incompatibility with assistive devices: screen readers for the blind are often unusable without installing new operating systems;
- lack of adequate services: many websites are too complicated for inexperienced users or cognitive disabilities and for people with visual disabilities is difficult or impossible to read;
- lack of products or services to certain groups, such as telephone communication for users of sign language;
- lack of accessible content.

eAccessibility and related assistive technology products and services are now among the medium-term objectives of the major manufacturers, not only in Europe but also in other regions (Chitiba, 2011).

e-Accessibility is addressed to the blind, people with low visual acuity, but also to people who have no access to education.

European institutions have mentioned in several contexts the need to integrate all Europeans in the information society (Chitiba, 2011).

#### **4. The role of education in achieving social inclusion**

Education for all aims at everyone access to quality education and lifelong learning. In achieving this goal, it is necessary that the education system to provide a certain openness in terms of education, namely the use of the most useful methods of teaching and assessment skills that are intended to stimulate students with special needs.

The EU supports the efforts that every country should do to promote inclusive education and continuous training among students with disabilities, offering even their mobility through continuing education program in all EU countries.

At the same time, EU through eLearning Programme promotes ICT adoption, in various forms, and Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 includes electronic education. Thus, education must adapt to the requirements of society and every individual must be able to learn during the whole his lives.

The profound changes in technology over the last twenty years have led to radical changes in the ways of conceiving of education, so the computer-mediated learning has developed a new dimension with multiple benefits for students (Ceobanu & Asandului, 2007).

The principle of lifelong learning allows the individualized approach education in relation to the needs and aspirations of each person and the instruction design introduces Internet technologies for effective learning. ICT resources used in education are an important support in the learning process, but not eliminate traditional methods for learning in the classroom with a teacher or self-training (Vasilache, 2008).

The integration of persons with disabilities is a complex process and sustained which requires participation in social life together with others.

Integration formula is based on active school (learning by doing) and considers four functional levels:

- Physical integration, namely access to physical resources to satisfy their fundamental needs;
- Functional integration, respectively access to public services of society;
- Social integration through membership in various groups;
- Societal integration, namely the participation of disabled people to productive process of community.

In literature are often used the terms "persons with special needs" and "special educational requirements" starting from the special needs to education (derived or not from a deficiency) which are additional and complementary to

objectives of education for each person. The inadequate approach to these requirements will not have as effect the equalization of opportunities and the school integration, professional and social.

Promoting social inclusion in terms of educational systems includes:

- Development of education systems based on high standards of quality;
- Increasing the number of assistive technology equipment in schools for special education in order to achieve effective teaching process;
- Designing an individualized curriculum for students with special needs;
- Promoting inclusive personalized approach;
- Providing specific training to teachers in special education schools;
- Increasing the availability of teaching materials including accessible electronically lessons which integrate assistive technology;
- Increasing social acceptance and understanding of the needs of people with disabilities.

In terms of Europe 2020 goals, education and training have a fundamental role in the lifelong learning by ensuring the necessary skills to improve their employability, social inclusion and personal fulfillment.

## 5. Conclusions

Ensuring social inclusion can be achieved through a quality education based on new technologies, which provides the opportunity to develop those skills and abilities necessary for society to remain competitive and innovative.

Training of key competences for all as a result of effective teaching process based on the adjustment of supply to individual requirements, offers an important role to education for promoting social inclusion.

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